

REFORMED CHURCH BELLVILLE. MORNING SERVICE. 7 August 2011.

Sing before: Hymn 14-1:1+2

Our help is in the Name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Beloved, grace and peace be with you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ through the mighty working of God the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Song of praise, Psalm 63:3.

Confession of faith: Nicene Creed.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and on the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

We believe one holy and catholic (universal) and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

After the reading of the Law we confess our guilt of sin and pray for the forgiving of our sins with Psalm 25:9.

Reading of the Law.

Psalm 25:9.

Prayer.

Psalm 34:4

Scripture reading: Hebrews 4.

Text: Hebrews 4: 1:

“Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.”

Leaders who have fallen behind without being aware of it!

- Our estimation of our religion or our values in life is often very high.
- As far as we are concerned it is usually of the best and are we quite up to the measure.

But when a calibrated ruler is held against our religious life, it is found that many of us have fallen short because we have tired. We have fallen short and cannot enter the Lord's rest.

1. Why did the corpses remain in the wilderness?
2. Where do we fit in?

1. Why did the corpses remain in the wilderness?

The passage we have read is in fact a sermon about the last part of Psalm 95.

The text of the sermon to the Hebrews that we have read is the following:

- do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Messah in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation; I said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, "They shall never enter my rest" – (Psalm 95:8-11)

The background to this sermon is Israel in the wilderness, always demanding that God must give them satisfaction whereas they fall short in their duty towards God.

- They do not glorify and adore God.
- Hence the LORD was angered and took an oath that from that generation not a single one would enter the Promised Land.
- The rest of which the LORD speaks is Palestine, the land that was promised to the Israelites as their inheritance.
- That is why those who had forfeited this rest wandered around in the desert for forty years until all of them had died.
- That is what the words "*fall short*" refer to – those whose corpses were left in the desert, who did not make it to the Promised Land.

This history is narrated in Numbers 14:22:

- not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times – not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it.

This is the event which is referred to in Psalm 95 and about which the sermon is in the epistle to the Hebrews. These obstinate Israelites are held up as an example to warn us against apostasy and flagging in our relationship with God.

In chapter 3:6 we find the prologue to this matter in that the Hebrews are exhorted to hold on to the hope.

- A Christian must live his life in this world with an ever present vision of the life hereafter.
- Because it is in the life hereafter that we find the rest that God promised us.
- Palestine, the land to which the Israelites were travelling through the desert, is in the Bible the symbol representing God's rest.
- It pictures the eternal rest and peace that there shall be with God in heaven.

That is why the words in chapter 4:1 are so sudden and so forceful:

Hold on to the promise of entering the rest! Let it not be proved that you fell short!

The same issue is addressed in chapter 3:8-11 where the author tells us not to test and try the Lord until He punishes us.

- Do not be like the Israelites in the desert holding your claims up against those of God and then consider yours to be more important.
- God swore an oath in His anger that they would never enter His rest.

As we, too, are inclined to do, these churches of the New Testament among the Hebrews (diaspora) gradually began to adopt new values.

- Slowly but surely it resulted in them turning away from God.
- Hence these words in Hebrews 3:12:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

Once you have come to the point that you harden yourself against God it is too late for you. Then you can no longer enter God's rest.

But we are not hopelessly lost in our sins.

- These Israelites were punished while the promise that they would enter God's rest still stood.
- They were on the road to the Promised Land – as we are on the road to eternity with the Father.
- That stands to reason because we have a part in Christ. All we need to do is to hold onto our faith confidently until the end.
- That is why the Lord let it be written down expressly that the promise to enter His rest still stands.

A Christian's life must be such that he looks forward to perfection. The text therefore is a mild command: Persevere to the end!

- Hold on until the end of your life, because the end of your life is also the end of your struggle and perseverance here on earth.
- If that is not a characteristic of your life you share in the disobedience of Israel.

It was their disobedience that caused them to forfeit the rest of Canaan and to fall in the desert.

- Disobedience originates in unbelief.
- That is why the Lord says in Psalm 95 that they saw His works and yet did not know His ways.
- In spite of everything that was done for them they *still did not believe*.

These people came to know the violence of God's judgement. Hence the beginning of chapter 4 is so anxious and pressing!

- Be careful not to fall short!
- Beware that you do not become one of those who must die in the desert – while God's rest is so enticingly close.
- Beware! The promise of God's rest still stands for you too – and if you do not believe it, you will suffer under God's terrible judgment.
- God's wrathful judgment is merciless. It is devoid of any grace at all.

2. Where do we fit in?

And now the most important point: This sermon in the epistle to the Hebrews is preached to the faithful who sat all over the world in the young Christian churches where this letter was read out to them! Therefore everything in this letter is directed to us as well for we also share in this dispensation.

- Nobody has any excuse.
- The gospel was and is preached to everybody – to us as well as to the Israelites in the wilderness and to the Hebrew Christians to whom this epistle was addressed.

The Lord has not withdrawn Himself from us.

- The promise of entering his rest still stands – that is what the Gospel tells us.
- Verse 2 says that you must not be deaf when you hear it. Hear and believe!

We have the proof of God's grace and the confirmation of his promise in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- He died precisely so that the promise of entering God's rest would no longer be a promise only but become a reality.
- We still live in the period of grace. This promise and its fulfillment are still being preached.
- Therefore we must examine our lives seriously – what we do and don't do.

In Psalm 95 we read that the Israelites who survived the forty years now have a particular lifestyle. Read verse 6:

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

It boils down to the way in which we truly live – whether we expect the promise in our lives!

- Do we still *worship*?
- In prayer and beseechingly?
- Zealously attending church?
- Beware of falling short!

The coming down to earth by the Lord Jesus is about these matters. Remember that immediately after the fall into sin we began to regress in our ethical life and our salvation.

- His deed of reconciliation was aimed at saving the backsliding sinners who had regressed in faith.
- For all their failings He did atonement with God.

That is what He did to obtain reconciliation for us. But He did more than that: As the fruit of His death He sent us God the Holy Spirit.

Why? What does God the Holy Spirit do to me?

- By His Holy Spirit the Lord Jesus assures me of the everlasting life.
- By the Holy Spirit He makes me heartily willing and ready to live every second of my existence unto Him. (Heidelberg Catechism Lord's Day 1)

God the Holy Spirit therefore engenders in me a true faith – that is the faith on which the epistle to the Hebrews is based, because someone who has that faith does not fall behind in God's grace. We profess that true faith (H C Lord's Day 7):

It is not only a certain knowledge, whereby I hold for truth all that God has revealed to us in His Word; but also a hearty trust which the Holy Spirit works in me by the Gospel, that not only to others, but to me also, forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation are freely given by God, merely of grace, for the sake of Christ's merits.

We are now in the year 2011. Where do we go now with the Lord's exhortation that we must not fall short in the faith?

We go forward joyfully and when we slide back we repent! Can we?

- Yes! We can, because, firstly, the Lord Jesus, by His Holy Spirit poured out His heavenly gifts on us, his members.
- Secondly, He (the Lord Jesus) defends and preserves us by His power against all enemies. (H C question 51)

Sometimes we become despondent and we believe that we are unable to rid ourselves of sin.

- Do not let that kind of doubt assail and overcome you – we profess that God the Holy Spirit was given to each one of us so that by the true faith He lets us share in Christ and all His benefits, that He comforts us and lives with us eternally.
- Who can stop God's almighty ministry? Do we not confess that we are renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, that so we may more and more die unto sin, and lead holy and unblamable lives? (H C question 70)

It is precisely these matters to which the author of the letter to the Hebrews refers with the words:

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.(Hebrews 4:14)

The gospel of redemption from sin and the grace in Jesus the Lord is regularly heard in the church of the Lord – but as against that the world offers us many other religious structures.

- The world's offer of happiness and salvation is one that unties us from God and sends us on a different road with completely different life values.
- Unfortunately, that which the world and science offers us, does not bring salvation!
- Modern man often practices some sort of politics that is a religion to him but brings no salvation after death!
- It hardly offers some salvation in the temporal life – as if salvation is to be found in worldly wealth and then specifically in the way people find it.
- The Hereafter lies beyond the perspective of the here and now.

People who fall into these things are the ones whose graves are in the loneliness of the desolate desert.

- They are the people of whom the Lord says that they have never seen God's rest!
- The fact that they lie dead in the desert beyond the boundaries of Canaan is symbolic thereof that they will not be in heaven!
- So it happens that people who think that they are ahead and with it have long ago already fallen behind.

In this part of the epistle to the Hebrews the stress is not on what Israel does, but on what the relationship is between that what they do and their relationship with the Lord.

- It is about why we do what we do.
- Do we believe or are we, like them, obstinate, because then we will be punished as they were!
- They are only an example.

Especially our young people should listen. What about you, for you are the church of the future?

- Do you hold on to the promises that Jesus Christ had to bear God's wrath unto the depths of hell so that He could conquer death?
- Do you believe that He ascended to heaven to prepare for you a place in the Father's rest?
- Do you know what it means to enter God's rest?

Beware that at an early stage you already fall behind. God's wrath knows no mercy.

Beloved, for all we know there may be many among us who have fallen away in their faith and obedience to God.

- We no longer pray – at least not all of us.
- We also no longer have family-prayers in the evening to thank God for another day.
- Our knowledge of God and His Word becomes poorer.
- When listening to some people's reasons why they do not wish to participate in church actions their ignorance of God and His Word is simply dumbfounding.
- The true love of God therefore is absent in those people.

For those people who persist therein, the rest of the Father is replaced with the oath the Father swore in His anger that we shall never enter His rest.

- The mistake made by the post-modern man is that he measures faith with his own ruler.
- He determines how God should be. And also what in God's revelation is acceptable to him and what not-

- That is why there are some theologians who declare that the Old Testament with all its cruelties is unacceptable to us who claim to be developed.
- That is precisely the reason why the LORD'S Law is not read in many churches.

The Lord's command to us is that, in all that pertains to worship and adoration of Him, we must satisfy the measure that God himself gives.

That is why He says that we must beware that some of us be found to have fallen short.

Let us then exert ourselves to enter God's rest. Let us fight against all forms of disobedience to the Lord.

Do not be disheartened and believe that you cannot win.

- Fight courageously because we do not fight alone – God's Spirit fights with us.
- He gives us insight and the gift of discernment when needed.

God's promise of entering his rest still stands. God does not change – His promises stand fast unto eternity.

Amen.

Closing prayer.

Closing song: Hymn 15-7:5 (43:5)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Amen.

Dr M J Du Plessis
Reformed Church Bellville.
Sunday 7-08-2011.
Scripture: N I V.